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God Has Spoken—Getting God's Message

Jennings Davis

I grew up in the Hillsboro Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee. Every Sunday morning Leslie Self, the song director, opened the service leading the hymn “The Lord Is in His Holy Temple.” The first stanza goes on to say, “... Let all the earth keep silence before Him. Keep silence. Keep silence. Keep silence before Him” (William J. Kirkpatrick). We gathered in a well-appointed sanctuary seating about 350. It had a balcony and two “Amen” sections of seats on each side down front, pews facing a raised rostrum with access steps on each end and a fine imposing dark walnut pulpit. There were three high-backed upholstered chairs on the rostrum for the participants in the service. When it was time for the sermon, all left the “stage” leaving only the preacher before a “*silent*” assembly! On the pulpit sat one of those large family Bibles clearly visible to all. The minister, B. C. Goodpasture, who was seated in the middle chair on the rostrum, would get up, walk to the pulpit and open the big Bible to the scripture text he would be using in his sermon. He flawlessly read the passage of scripture (King James Version), closed the Bible and began to preach (actually *orate*) without any notes. This whole “ritual” made a huge impression on me. It literally felt like that imposing Bible *was* the word of God, and the passage that he read was a *direct message from God*! Later J. P. Sanders graced that pulpit. After him, Batsell Barrett Baxter became the minister, followed by Rubel Shelley. But the same Bible remained on the pulpit as the focal point of the service. The writer of Hebrews in 13.7 (all biblical quotations will be from the New Century Version unless otherwise indicated) exhorts us to “... remember your leaders. They taught God’s message to you.” These are vivid memories and by mentioning them I feel I have “remembered” these men respectfully. For me in those early years of my life, this *was* worship. I usually sat with my parents in the same pew Sunday after Sunday. I joined the older youths on the front row when I was about eleven years old. Then I was looking up at the preacher from close range—much like being on the front row at a movie. The preacher’s message was often “over my head” (literally and theologically), but I knew it was God speaking—*it must be!*

I also attended David Lipscomb College, now Lipscomb University, from the first grade through college. I was taught a Bible class *every day* for sixteen years! I developed a deep respect for the Bible. When I began to teach, preach and read the scripture publicly, I was conscious of doing it in a way that people would feel they were listening to God’s message. That meant giving emphasis where it was appropriate, using proper inflections and pausing to lend importance to the wording and meaning. I became aware that *I was God’s instrument to convey his message* to the listeners.

Having the Message

In this article, I want to let the letter to the Hebrews show how the message from God is to be received. We “go to church,” we read and study the Bible and we listen to sermons all to be influenced by God’s presence and by his message. Our salvation and our daily life are directly tied to our reception of the teaching and message from God. Romans 10.17 declares that “Faith comes from hearing the Good News. And people hear the Good News when someone tells them about Christ.” Worshipping God is a sacred trust and a rarified blessing. We are encouraged to make it an essential part of our spiritual life and to assemble with our sisters

and brothers to praise God and receive his message. God has always communicated to his people and wants them to listen, pay attention and heed his teaching. Nothing disappoints parents more than when children don't listen to them when they are trying to communicate with them. The major quarrel God had with Israel was that they did not listen (Isa 6.10)! One of the great blessings of being a Christian is the daily inspiration and direction we receive from being exposed to God's message when we read and study the Bible on our own and in the assemblies of the saints.

Hebrews starts by telling us that, "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets. He spoke to them many times and in many different ways. And now in these last days, God has spoken to us through His Son" (Heb 1.1). Ever since God bellowed out into the darkness of space "Let there be light!" he has communicated, spoken and expressed himself. He has let his universe and all that is in it know his will. Even without hearing his voice or being exposed to holy writings, humans can still learn about him by observing the things he made. Paul explains in Romans 1.18–21 that "everything that may be known about God has been made clear.... There are things about God that people cannot see—his eternal power and all the things that make him God.... Since the beginning of the world those things have been easy to understand. They are made clear by what God has made." So God does not leave us in the dark about who he is and what he wants from human beings. In the Bible story sometimes he personally speaks to human beings, and sometimes he uses other means to deliver his message. He spoke to Moses out of the burning bush and he spoke to the people of Nineveh through the prophet Jonah. There were times when his voice could be heard audibly, as when he stopped Abram from sacrificing his son Isaac and when he called out to young Samuel in the night. He spoke to Balaam through a donkey. He spoke to Paul in a dream. He spoke to David through the prophet Nathan. He spoke to Saul through a witch. He "spoke" to Peter through the crowing of a rooster.

So, now he speaks to us through Jesus Christ, the Son of God! Remember that one of the names given to Jesus is Immanuel, which means "God with us." In effect, God came into the presence of earthlings, and speaks to us through Jesus. One time Jesus was in the temple teaching. The Jews were amazed and said, "This man has never studied in school. How can he learn so much?" Jesus answered, "The things I teach are not my own. My teaching comes from him who sent me...my teaching comes from God...it is not my own" (John 7.14–17). No wonder the people who heard him give what we call the Sermon on the Mount were amazed and concluded that he didn't teach like their teachers of the law, but "taught like a person who had authority" (Matt 7.28–29).

Jesus spoke many things that were hard to hear and understand and many followers left him. He asked the apostles if they were going to leave too. Affirming their confidence in Jesus, Peter said, "Lord where would we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe in you. We know that you are the Holy One from God" (John 6.67–69). Today we hear children resist another child who is ordering them around by saying back, "I'm not going to do that. You are not the boss of me." Well, Jesus *is* the "boss" of us. We have put our trust in his righteousness to make us right with God. We are turning over the direction of our lives to him. It follows that our basic response is to *listen* to him. In worship we are seeking his presence and his message. We bend low in obeisance and we bend our ear to hear his voice—happily!

Hearing the Message

The worship experience for Christians is at once humbling *and* exciting. To approach God requires a humble respect for his glory; but at the same time it is exhilarating and rewarding. The whole atmosphere in Hebrews is that God is approachable because of Christ's saving grace, and that we can come before him without hindrance or having to overcome obstacles. Observe these references: "So...we are completely free to enter the Most Holy Place" (Heb 10.19). Remember that under the old covenant only the high priest could enter. "...so let us come near to God with a sincere heart and a sure faith" (Heb 10.22). It takes faith to come to God. We can't see him, touch him, or prove he is there, but "anyone who comes to God must believe that he is real and that he rewards those who truly want to find him" (Heb 11.6). "Let us feel free to come before God's throne. Here there is grace. And we can receive mercy and grace to help us when we need it" (Heb 4.16). Many people around the world

generally perceive a god as one before whom to be afraid, who punishes and condemns and keeps his adherents at a distance. “But now a better hope has been given to us. And with this hope we can come to God” (Heb 7.19). Our presence before God is not one of cowering fear but of joyous hope. “Jesus lives forever. He will never stop serving as priest. So he is always able to save those who come to God through him...ready to help those who come before God” (Heb 10.23, 25).

Through the eyes of faith and with our sanctified imagination let us visualize the scene here. Look at Hebrews 4.14–16: “We have a great high priest who has gone into heaven.... Our high priest is able to understand our weaknesses. When he lived on earth, he was tempted in every way that we are, but he did not sin. Let us then feel free to come before God’s throne.” Remember Jesus is seated at God’s right hand. Now, see yourself (myself) coming into the church sanctuary, approaching God’s throne. We can do this freely, with confidence, because Jesus, who knows us and our human predicament, is sitting next to God. As he sees us approaching he leans over and whispers to God, “I know this woman/man. Because they confessed their faith in me and trusted my shed blood to cleanse them, they are my friends and I ask you to hear their plea and look favorably on them as they come to you now.”

As imposing and glory-ridden as the presence of God is, it is also inviting and full of excitement and joy. See the contrast in the metaphor of two mounts (Heb 12.18–24). Here the writer describes “the mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire.... If anything, even an animal, touches the mountain, it must be put to death with stones. What they saw was so terrible that Moses said ‘I am shaking with fear.’” We are familiar with the scene at Mount Sinai where there were frightening scenes and sounds—of smoke, thunder and fire. The writer then says, “*You have not come to that kind of place. The new place you have come to is Mount Zion. You have come to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to...angels gathered together with joy. You have come to the meeting of God’s first-born children.... You have come to God.... You have come to the spirits of good people who have been made perfect. You have come to Jesus, the one who brought a new agreement from God.... You have come to the sprinkled blood....*” At Sinai the message was in effect, “Keep your distance”; but *we* are invited to a place like the mount where Jesus sat and taught, and where the people came close, eager to listen. Clearly Jesus is offering a new way to relate to God.

Worshipping under the new covenant means “coming near.” It is a fitting place to have our spirits refreshed, our souls cleansed, our minds renewed and our hearts moved. It is where we hear the message of God read from the scriptures, recited by our sisters and brothers, and embedded in the music of our hymns. No wonder the writer says immediately following this description of the worship environment, “...We should worship God in a way that pleases him; so let us worship him with respect and fear [reverence]” (Heb 12.25–28). Clearly, the basic action of the worshipper is an attitude of receiving, listening and accepting. The worshipper feels in God’s presence truth (reality), and shows deep holy regard and respect for the message.

Perhaps we can get no closer to heaven on earth than when we are together in our assemblies of worship. We are admonished *not* to “stay away from the church meetings” with our brothers and sisters, but to “meet together and encourage each other” (Heb 10.25). The whole worship experience and its environment should lift the worshippers’ attention upwards. Usually the sanctuary is designed with features that draw the worshiper’s eyes up with vaulted ceilings, raised pulpit areas and angles and arches. To stand together as the scriptures are read in the assembly can be a thrilling experience. When we gather in anticipation of the reality of what is going on and everything is arranged to facilitate a *message from God*, we cannot help but be impressed and inspired.

Harvesting the Message

A serious problem for God’s people has always been hearing without really listening and listening without any understanding. The writer shows serious disappointment that those to whom he is writing have *not* grown in their understanding of the message of God. He says that they are “...slow to understand. You had enough time that by now you ought to be teachers. But you need someone to teach you again the first lessons of God’s message. You still need teaching that is like milk. You are not ready for solid food. Anyone who lives on

milk is still a baby.... But solid food is for those who are grown up.... So let us go on to *grown-up* teaching. Let us not go back over the beginning lessons we learned in Christ" (Heb 5.11–6.1). The assumption is that they had heard the *words* but had not gotten the *message*. Maybe they were content to "get it right," but they were not nurtured by that failure. They had missed the message, and had closed up to the spiritual nutrition that is in the message.

The words are the words of God, but the message from God is contained *within* those words. The message God wants me to receive may be different from the message he intends for someone else. The Holy Spirit will be at work helping us hear the message that is intended for us. Our receptiveness should be like that of Samuel when he heard the voice of God, "Speak, Lord. I am your servant and I am listening" (1 Sam 3.10). Getting the message that is intended for us is not always easy. We have been taught so much and have so many preconceived thoughts and beliefs about the Bible that it is hard to keep from being influenced by all of that when we hear or read the words afresh. Those of us in the Church of Christ tradition have adopted long-standing formulas of faith and doctrine almost set in concrete, and any time those are challenged we automatically resist rather than saying, "That is a new approach. Let's discuss it and maybe we will find some new message that we haven't seen before." We have traditional rules about how to interpret scripture, so that when someone suggests a different approach we stiffen and resist, rather than open our minds to a possibly better way of looking at it. Because of our long tradition of trying to be distinct from denominations and denominationalism we have tended to find "proof texts" to show that certain practices were wrong or right. We had a tradition of debating with our denominational friends in large meetings, trying to prove the minutest technicality of scripture. We began to derive certain laws in the New Testament that had to be followed or we would be in danger of being "lost." We were so busy defending "the faith" that we lost sight of the message of faith (trust) in the grace of God. I was in college in a class with Dr. J. Ridley Stroop before I heard any serious discussion of the message of "grace." It was so new and revolutionary that it redirected my whole understanding of Christianity and put my preaching and teaching on a totally different course. Instead of focusing on what *we* must *do*, I began to focus on what *God* has already *done*. Here in Hebrews the writer suggests that "Your hearts should be strengthened by God's grace, not by obeying rules.... Obeying such rules does not help anyone" (Heb 13.9).

The challenge for us is not to try to always be "right," but to be faithful. We can never be perfect or perfectly right. Our hope is in God's grace to accept us in spite of our errors, faults and failures. It is a very liberating thought to be righteous in God's sight not because of *our* correctness or rightness, but because of our trust in *Jesus'* righteousness. Our goal is not to find all the right rules and obey them to the letter, but rather to admit our inability to be right and depend on the Lord for our right standing with God. Our unity in Christ does not depend on our having the same opinions or beliefs, but on our having the same Father.

If the words of scripture contain the word of God, then we need to hear more than the words. Just as parables and metaphors need to be explained so, too, does every passage. Behind the words there are contemporary circumstances, historical conditions and cultural circumstances that give each passage a context and determine its meaning. Interpreting scripture involves more than just an accurate translation but a broader perspective of the environment in which it was written. For instance, when Jesus was commenting on adultery and divorce, he called on his listeners to be sure there is a serious breach of the marriage vows before getting a divorce, not merely something about the wife that the husband did not like. That means that the passage is a call for liberation of women from the situation in which they were routinely mistreated and put them on a more equal footing with men in marriage (Matt 5.27–32). We are often so determined to find a commandment, a rule or a proof text that we don't get the real message. We may get the technicalities (letter) of the "law" right, but we may in fact neglect the spirit of the "law," which *is* the message. Jesus said that was like "a person who picks a fly out of his drink and then swallows a camel" (Matt 23.24).

Harvesting the message may involve both words and music. The power of a song, aria or ballad to have an impact on the listener involves both the words and the melody. At a performance of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra several years ago, the opera diva Kathleen Battle sang a beautiful melody, "Over my head I hear music in the air. There must be a God somewhere." She sang it *a cappella* and the audience was

mesmerized. It was the absolute clarity of her voice, the simple melody, her majestic presence and the silence of the room, as well as the words that captivated everyone. Everyone seemed to feel at that moment that there *was* a God somewhere—*near*! When we expose ourselves to the message of God we can expect it to have an impact on our souls not just our minds. Think of poetry. Because it is presented in certain rhythms, rhymes and cadences it carries more of an influence than the mere words. It also suggests pictures and vivid scenes that accompany the message. For example, this prayer in poetic form from my friend Ann Hudson in her privately published book, *Prayers for the Journey*:

Silence
 Where are YOU God?
 I cannot hear your voice...
 Silence surrounds me
 Engulfing me like a shroud...
 Wrapping me in a blanket of
 stagnation
 I cry out to you
 but your silence is too loud
 My voice too weak...
 As the shroud loosens
 and the blanket drops
 and I know
 the silence I feel
 comes from within me,
 YOU are waiting
 for the death of my silence
 so YOU can speak!

Just now I was on the phone with a friend who put me on hold to transfer my call to another number. While I was waiting, a beautiful piece of recorded music came on. So, I was “on hold” *but* I was also being blessed with this music that made my wait quite enjoyable! We must be careful not to miss the message within the message, which often is indeed *the* message. Understanding the message in the Bible is difficult and sometimes requires “reading between the lines.”

Heeding the Message

The writer follows his assertion that “God has spoken” with a strong admonition. “So we must be... careful to follow what we were taught” (Heb 2.1). He affirms that only in this way can we avoid being “pulled away from the truth” about Jesus’ salvation. The blessings of God’s grace found in the salvation that Jesus offers are bestowed on those who not only hear the message but *heed* it. Jesus states that “Everyone who hears these things that I say and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house on a rock...but the person who hears the things I teach and does not obey them is like a foolish man who built his house on the sand...” (Matt 7.24–26).

One might wonder why one would build a house on the sand. We in California are famous for “foolish” building—on hillsides that are subject to flooding and mudslides, near earthquake faults, in canyons subject to fires and close to beaches that suffer high tides and even tsunamis. But we all in many other ways do foolish things—we eat too much, drink too much, drive too fast, and more. Hebrews suggests that we do not heed the message because we are stubborn. “Today listen to what he says. Do not be stubborn” (Heb 4.7). Most of us have large egos and have a hard time taking advice, “using our heads,” or listening to the wisdom of the ages. We want what we want when we want it, and we’ll deal with the consequences when they come. We also have glands, and often succumb to the urges of the flesh in the face of serious danger, while our egos suggest

that we can get away with it. The only way to escape the calamities of our foolish behavior is to be so aware of the message of God, so committed to it and so aware of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us that we that we'll follow God's will "no matter what." Be reminded that Satan relied on *some words* from God to set three temptations before Jesus in the wilderness; however, Jesus relied on the *message of God* to resist the temptations of Satan (Matt 4.1–11).

Another reason we do not "heed" the message is lack of faith. The Israelites failed to enter the Land of Canaan, the promised land (referred to as God's "rest" in Heb 3.18). "Now God has left *us* that promise that we may enter and have his rest.... *They* heard it but did not accept it with faith" (Heb 4.1, 2). We fail because we do not trust God to keep his promises. We give up on God for not answering our prayers so far, and lose our confidence in his promises. Be encouraged by this, "God wanted to prove that his promise was true...to those who would get what he promised.... God cannot lie when he makes a promise, and he cannot lie when he makes an oath. These things encourage us who came to God for safety. They give us strength to hold on to the hope...." (Heb 6.17–19a). The message from God will work miracles in us if we not only *believe* that it is true, but if we also *trust* him who spoke it.

Honoring the Message

Hebrews tells us that the message of God delivers a mighty force. "God's word is alive and working. It is sharper than a sword sharpened on both sides. It cuts all the way into us, where the soul and the spirit are joined. It cuts to the center of our joints and our bones. And God's word judges the thoughts and feelings in our hearts" (Heb 4.12). This does not sound like the Bible is a rulebook, or a recipe book, or a set of maps and patterns, or a volume of statutes. It is not even a so-called "self-help" book. It contains the story of God's dealings with the world, with the people in it and with his chosen people. Imbedded in it is a message that "cuts to the quick," exposing our true nature, our innermost thoughts and motives, and making us face up to our true motives and selfish desires. It reveals our relationship (or lack thereof) to God. Mind you, the words themselves are just words, but the *message from God* has that kind of impact. If we are really putting ourselves into the experience and actively listening for God's voice *we will get it!* And it will change us.

Consider Isaiah's visit to the temple (Isa 6.1–8). It was a time of national mourning because King Uzziah had died. He was a good king and was beloved by the people. Isaiah had counseled him for many years. Sad and grieving, he went to "church." There he had a fresh vision of God "sitting on a very high throne" surrounded by angels singing so loudly that it caused the "frame around the door to shake." He was led by this new perspective of God to confess his sins and declare that he was not pure, "...I have seen the King the Lord of heaven's armies," he said. At that moment an angel came and with an ember from the altar touched Isaiah's lips and made him clean. Then Isaiah heard God calling for someone to volunteer to go and do his will; Isaiah said, "Here I am. Send me!"

When our view of God is in focus, we can see ourselves clearly. Only then can we genuinely confess our human condition and honor God's call. Could there be any better outcome from "going to church"?

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